
On Postmodernism and Articulation

An Interview with Stuart Hall

Edited by Lawrence Grossberg

Question: I would like to begin by asking how you would locate your interest in and relationship to the current explosion of work within what is called "postmodernism." Perhaps, as a way of getting into this rather convoluted set of discourses, you could comment on how you would position yourself in the debate between Habermas and Lyotard.

Hall: I am interested in it for a number of reasons. First I am fascinated by the degree to which postmodernism has taken off in America—its immediate success as a concept, compared with either post-marxism or poststructuralism. "Postmodernism" is the biggest success story going. And since it is, in essence, such a devastating story—precisely about American culture, it seems a funny thing to be so popular. It's like asking, how long can you live with the end of the world, how much of a bang can you get out of the big bang? And yet, apart from that, one has to come to terms with it. The concept poses key questions about the shape and tendency of contemporary culture. It is emerging in Europe as a central focus of debate, and there are very serious issues involved. Let me consider the specific question of the debate between Habermas and Lyotard.

Briefly, I don't really agree with either of them. I think Habermas' defense of the Enlightenment/ modernist project is worthy and courageous, but I think it's not sufficiently exposed to some of the deeply contradictory tendencies in modern culture to which the postmodernist theories quite correctly draw our attention. But I think Lyotard, and Baudrillard in his celebratory mode, really have gone right through the sound barrier. They are involved, not simply in identifying new trends or tendencies, new cultural configurations, but in learning to love them. I think they collapse these two steps—analysis and prescription—into one. It's a bit like that precursor-prophet of postmodernism, Marshall McLuhan. When Marshall McLuhan first began to write about the media, he had come down from Cambridge as a committed Leavisite critic. His first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, was highly critical of the new technologies. In fact, he referred to this book as "a civil defense against mass media fallout." But the disillusionment soon turned into its opposite—celebration, and in his later work, he took a very different position, just lying back and letting the media roll over him; he celebrated the very things he had most bitterly attacked. I think something like that has happened among the postmodern ideologues. You can see, behind this celebration of the American age, the deep disillusionment of the left-bank Parisian literary intelligentsia. So, in relation to the still-too-integrated positions enunciated in the critical theory of Habermas, post-modernists are quite correct to talk about the erosion of the enlightenment project, the sharp changes taking place in

modernism, etc. But I think the label "postmodernism," especially in its American appropriation (and it is about how the world dreams itself to be "American") carries two additional charges: it not only points to how things are going in modern culture, but it says, first, that there is nothing else of any significance—no contradictory forces, and no counter-tendencies; and second, that these changes are terrific, and all we have to do is to reconcile ourselves to them. It is, in my view, being deployed in an essentialist and un-critical way. And it is irrevocably Euro- or western-centric in its whole episteme.

So we are caught between two unacceptable choices: Habermas' defensive position in relation to the old Enlightenment project and Lyotard's Euro-centered celebration of the postmodern collapse. To understand the reasons for this oversimplified binary choice is simple enough, if one starts back far enough. I don't think that there is any such thing as *the* modernist impulse, in the singular. Modernism itself was a decisively "western" phenomenon. It was always composed of many different projects, which were not all integratable or homogeneous with one another; they were often, in fact, in conflict. For example, consider Adorno and Benjamin: both were theorists of the modern and in some ways, very close together in formation. They are also bitterly, deeply, opposed to one another on some key questions. Now I know that shorthand terms like "modernism" can be useful in everyday exchanges but I don't know, analytically, what the single project was which modernism might have been. And it's very important to realize that, if modernism was never one project, then there have always been a series of different tendencies growing out of it as it has developed historically. I think this is similar to the argument behind Perry Anderson's critique of Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* in a recent *New Left Review*. While I like Berman's book very much and think that there is a rather traditionalist view of modernism built into Perry Anderson's response, I still agree with Anderson rather than Berman on the central argument about periodization. I don't think that what Berman is describing is a new epoch but rather the accentuation of certain important tendencies in the cultures of the overdeveloped "west" which, if we understand the complex histories of modernism properly, have been in play in a highly uneven way since modernism emerged.

Now we come to postmodernism and what I want to know is: is postmodernism a global or a "western" phenomenon? Is postmodernism the word we give to the rearrangement, the new configuration, which many of the elements that went into the modernist project have now assumed? Or is it, as I think the postmodernist theorists want to suggest, a new kind of absolute rupture with the past, the beginning of a new global epoch altogether? This is not merely a formal question, of where to place the break. If you are within the same epoch—the one which opens with the age of imperialism, mass democracy, mass consumption and mass culture from about 1880-1920—you have to expect that there will be continuities and transformations as well as ruptures and breaks.

Let's take the postmodernist argument about the so-called collapse or implosion of "the real." Three quarters of the human race have not yet entered the era of what we are pleased to call "the real." Furthermore, even within the West, ever since the development of modern mass media, and their introduction on a mass scale into cultural production, and their impact on the audiences for cultural products, we have witnessed the undermining of the absolutism of "the real," of the great discourses of realism, and the familiar realist and rationalist guarantees, the dominance of certain types of representational form, etc. I don't mean to argue that the new discourses and relationships between these things, which is in essence what we called "modernism," are the same in 1980 as they were in 1900.

But I don't know that with "postmodernism" we are dealing with something totally and fundamentally different from that break at the turn of the century. I don't mean to deny that we've gone through profound qualitative changes between then and now. There are, therefore, now some very perplexing features to contemporary culture that certainly tend to outrun the critical and theoretical concepts generated in the early modernist period. We have, in that sense, to constantly update our theories and to be dealing with new experiences. I also accept that these changes may constitute new subject-positions and social identities for people. But I don't think there is any such absolutely novel and unified thing as *the* postmodern condition. It's another version of that historical amnesia characteristic of American culture—the tyranny of the New.

I recognize, experientially or ideologically, what people mean when they point to this "condition." But I see it much more as one emergent trend or tendency amongst others—and still not fully crystallized out. For example, there is a very interesting film called *Wetherby*, written by the English playwright, David Hare, which is, formally, a very conventional film about a middle age woman who teaches in a provincial town (played by Vanessa Redgrave). A student, who is in the town for reasons which are never fully explained, turns up at a dinner party she's giving on her birthday. She thinks her friends have invited him, and they think she's invited him, so he comes in, is accepted as a guest, takes part in the conversations, and so forth. In the middle of the party there is a fleeting and unsuccessful sexual encounter with the teacher. The next day, he shows up again at her house, he sits at the table, starts conversing, and then he shoots himself. And the rest of the film is "about" who this person is who comes from nowhere, and why does he kill himself there, and does it have any connection with any other part of her life. Now, the interesting thing about the film, and why I say it contains emergent "postmodernist" elements, as it were, is that there is no story in the old sense. He doesn't come from anywhere; there is no whole story about him to tell. When his girlfriend turns up, she doesn't quite know why she's there either. She just came to the funeral and stays on a few days. But she doesn't want to be made into the explanation for him. So while the film has a very conventional structure, at its center is what I would call a recognizably postmodernist experience. In some ways this note in the British cinema is qualitatively new. But it isn't *totally* different from that disintegration of whole experiences, or from that experience of the self as a whole person with an integrated history whose life makes sense from some fixed and stable position that's been "in trouble" since at least Freud, Picasso, James Joyce, Brecht, and Surrealism.

So I would say postmodernism is the current name we give to how those old certainties began to run into trouble from the 1900s onwards. In that sense, I don't refuse some of the new things the postmodernists point to. They are extremely important, and the traditional Habermasian defense won't do. But the attempt to gather them all under a singular sign—which suggests a kind of final rupture or break with the modern era—is the point at which the operation of postmodernism becomes ideological in a very specific way. What it says is: this is the end of the world. History stops with us and there is no place to go after this. But whenever it is said that *this* is the last thing that will ever happen in history, that is the sign of the functioning, in the narrow sense, of the ideological—what Marx called the "eternalizing" effect. Since most of the world has not yet properly entered the modern era, who is it who "has no future left"? And how long will this "no future" last into the future, if you'll excuse the paradox? If the Titanic is going down [A reference to the slogan, "if you're sailing on the Titanic, go first class"—L.G.], how long is it going to take? If the bomb has

already gone off, can it go on "going off" forever? You can't live another century constantly confronting the end of the world. You can live this as a metaphor, suggesting that certain contemporary positions and ideas are now deeply undermined, rendered increasingly fragile as it were, by having the fact of the world's end as one of their imminent possibilities. That is a radically new historical fact and, I think, it has de-centered us all. In that sense, love and human relationships in the postmodern period feel very different—more temporary, provisional, contingent. But what we are looking at here is the deepening and elongation of the very same profound cultural and historical tendencies which constructed that break with "the modern" which we call "modernism." And I want to be able to retain the term "modernity" to refer to the long history—the long *durée*—of those tendencies.

Question: One of the very distinctive features of the so-called postmodern theorists is their abandonment of issues of meaning, representation and signification, and ideology. How would you respond to this turn?

Hall: There is here a very sharp polarization. I don't think it is possible to conceptualize language without meaning, whereas the postmodernists talk about the collapse or implosion of all meaning. I still talk about representation and signification, whereas Baudrillard says we are at the end of all representational and signifying practice. I still talk about ideology, whereas Foucault talks about the discursive which has no ideological dimension to it. Perhaps I am in these respects a dinosaur or a recidivist, but I find it very difficult to understand contemporary society and social practice giving up those three orienting points. I am not convinced by the theoretical arguments that have been advanced against them.

First, let's take Foucault's argument for the discursive as against the ideological. What Foucault would talk about is the setting in place, through the institutionalization of a discursive regime, of a number of competing regimes of truth and, within these regimes, the operation of power through the practices he calls normalization, regulation and surveillance. Now perhaps it's just a sleight of hand, but the combination of regime of truth plus normalization/regulation/surveillance is not all that far from the notions of dominance in ideology that I'm trying to work with. So maybe Foucault's point is really a polemical, not an analytic one, contesting one particular way of understanding those terms, within a much more linear kind of base/ superstructure model. I think the movement from that old base/superstructure paradigm into the domain of the discursive is a very positive one. But, while I have learned a great deal from Foucault in this sense about the relation between knowledge and power, I don't see how you can retain the notion of "resistance," as he does, without facing questions about the constitution of dominance in ideology. Foucault's evasion of the question is at the heart of his proto-anarchist position precisely because his resistance must be summoned up from no-where. Nobody knows where it comes from. Fortunately, it goes on being there, always guaranteed: insofar as there is power, there is resistance. But at any one moment, when you want to know how strong the power is, and how strong the resistance is, and what is the changing balance of forces, it's impossible to assess because such a field of force is not conceptualizable in his model. Why? Because there is no way of conceptualizing the balance of power between different regimes of truth without society conceptualized, not as a unity, but as a "formation." If Foucault is to prevent the regime of truth from collapsing into a synonym for the dominant ideology, he has to recognize that there are different regimes of truth in the social formation. And these are not simply "plural"—they define an ideological field of force. There

are subordinated regimes of truth which make sense, which have some plausibility, for subordinated subjects, while not being part of the dominant episteme. In other words, as soon as you begin to look at a discursive formation, not just as a single discipline but as a *formation*, you have to talk about the relations of power which structure the inter-discursivity, or the intertextuality, of the field of knowledge. I don't much care whether you call it ideology or not. What matters is not the terminology but the conceptualization. The question of the relative power and distribution of different regimes of truth in the social formation at any one time—which have certain effects for the maintenance of power in the social order—that is what I call "the ideological effect." So I go on using the term "ideology" because it forces me to continue thinking about that problem. By abandoning the term, I think that Foucault has let himself off the hook of having to retheorize it in a more radical way: i.e., he saves for himself "the political" with his insistence on power, but he denies himself a *politics* because he has no idea of the "relations of force."

Let's take Baudrillard's argument about representation and the implosion of meaning. This seems to rest upon an assumption of the sheer facticity of things: things *are* just what is seen on the surface. They don't mean or signify anything. They cannot be "read." We are beyond reading, language, meaning. Again, I agree with Baudrillard's attempt to contest the old manifest/latent type of hermeneutic analyses; this stands in his work as the base/superstructure does in Foucault's—that which has to be contested and displaced. Above- and under-ground is not a very useful way of thinking about appearance in relation to structural forces. Perhaps I ought to admit that some of the tendencies in cultural studies did go that way: phenomenal form/ real relation, despite all our qualifications, did suggest that the surface of things was only important in so far as you penetrated it to the underlying rules and codes. So Baudrillard is quite right in returning us to what there is, the facticity of life, the surface, the spectacle, etc. Politically, in England, this has come to connote a certain kind of "realism" on the left which argues that you can't always go behind what the masses manifestly think to what they really think: you also have to recognize the validity of how they do make sense of the world. But I think Baudrillard's position has become a kind of super-realism, taken to the nth degree. It says that, in the process of recognizing the real, there is *nothing* except what is immediately there on the surface. Of course, in so-called postmodern society, we feel overwhelmed by the diversity, the plurality, of surfaces which it is possible to produce, and we have to recognize the rich technological bases of modern cultural production which enable us endlessly to simulate, reproduce, reiterate, and recapitulate. But there is all the difference in the world between the assertion that there is no one, final, absolute meaning—no ultimate signified, only the endlessly sliding chain of signification, and, on the other hand, the assertion that meaning does not exist.

Benjamin reminded us quite a while ago that montage would destroy the aura of the unique and singular work of art forever. And once you destroy the aura of the singular work of art because it can be reiterated, you enter into a new era which cannot be approached in the same way, using the traditional theoretical concepts. You are going to have to operate your analysis of meaning without the solace of closure: more on the basis of the semantic raids that Benjamin proposed—to find the fragments, to decipher their assembly and see how you can make a surgical cut into them, assembling and reassembling the means and instruments of cultural production. It is this that inaugurates the modern era. But although this breaks the one, true meaning into fragments and puts one in the universe of the infinite plurality of codes, it does not destroy the process of encoding, which always entails the imposition of an arbitrary "closure." Indeed it actually enriches

it, because we understand meaning not as a natural but as an arbitrary act—the intervention of ideology into language. Therefore, I don't agree with Baudrillard that representation is at an end because the cultural codes have become pluralized. I think we are in a period of the infinite multiplicity of codings, which is different. We have all become, historically, fantastically codable encoding agents. We are in the middle of this multiplicity of readings and discourses and that has produced new forms of self-consciousness and reflexivity. So, while the modes of cultural production and consumption have changed, qualitatively, fantastically, as the result of that expansion, it does not mean that representation itself has collapsed. Representation has become a more problematic process but it doesn't mean the end of representation. Again, it is exactly the term "postmodernism" itself which takes you off the tension of having to recognize what is new, and of struggling to mobilize some historical understanding of how it came to be produced. Postmodernism attempts to close off the past by saying that history is finished, therefore you needn't go back to it. There is only the present, and all you can do is be with it, immersed in it.

Question: To what extent would you then describe yourself as a modernist attempting to make sense of these postmodern tendencies? To what extent can the inherent critical categories of modernism analyze the current forms and conditions of cultural production and reception? To what extent, for example, can modernism make sense of MTV?

Hall: I think MTV is quite extraordinary. It takes fragmentation, the plurality of signification, to new heights. But I certainly couldn't say that it is unintelligible. Each so-called meaningless fragment seems to me rich with connotations. It seems perfectly clear where MTV comes from: indeed, it is almost too predictable in its "unpredictability." Unpredictability is its meta-message. We know enough about the tendencies of mass culture for the last hundred years to recognize that MTV does not come from outer space. Don't misunderstand me. I do appreciate the genuine "openness" of postmodernism before these new cultural trends and forces. But the extrapolations about the universe it makes from them are plainly wildly exaggerated and ideological, based on taking one's own metaphors literally, which is a stupid mistake to make. Not all of those tendencies are by any means progressive; many of them are very contradictory. For instance, modern mass phenomena like the mega-event—like Liveaid, Farmaid, etc., or like Springsteen's current success—have many postmodern elements in them. But that doesn't mean they are to be seen as the unambiguous cultural expressions of an entirely new epoch. It seems to me that such events are, precisely, massively defined by their diversity, their contradictory plurality. Springsteen is a phenomenon that can be read, with equal conviction, in at least two diametrically opposed ways. His audiences seem to be made up of people from 5 to 50, busily reading him in different ways. The symbols are deeply American—populist in their ambiguity; he's both in the White House and On The Road. In the 60s, you had to be one or the other. Springsteen is somehow both at the same time. That's what I mean by fragmentation.

Now, if postmodernism wants to say that such processes of diversity and fragmentation, which modernism first tried to name, have gone much further, are technologically underpinned in new ways, and have penetrated more deeply into mass consciousness, etc., I would agree. But that does not mean that this constitutes an entirely new epoch or that we don't have any tools to comprehend the main trends in contemporary culture, so all we can do is to lie back and love it. I don't feel that those things which people are pointing to in postmodernism so entirely outrun our critical theories as to render those theories irrelevant. The

problem is that it is assumed that theory consists of a series of closed paradigms. If paradigms are closed, of course, new phenomena will be quite difficult to interpret, because they depend on new historical conditions and incorporate novel discursive elements. But if we understand theorizing as an open horizon, moving within the magnetic field of some basic concepts, but constantly being applied afresh to what is genuinely original and novel in new forms of cultural practice, and recognizing the capacity of subjects to reposition themselves differently, then you needn't be so defeated. True, the great discourses of classical Reason, and of the rationalist actor or subject are much weaker in their explanatory power now than they were before. So are the great evolutionary chains of explanation predicated on some teleological, progressive historical movement. But in the era of Hi Tech, the corporate, international economy and global communication networks, what does it mean to say—except as a metaphor exaggerated for affect—that the age of rationalism has ended. Only those who speak of "culture" abstracted from its material, technical and economic conditions of existence could hold such a position.

I think a postmodernist would be likely to see my response as too complacent, and perhaps that's what you mean by characterizing me as a modernist. I admit to being a modernist, in the sense that I find the early stages of the modernist project—when it is breaking through, historically, aesthetically, when it is all happening at once—the moment of Braque, Picasso, Joyce, Klee, the Bauhaus, Brecht, Heartfield, Surrealism and Dada—to be one of the most fantastically exciting intellectual moments in twentieth century history. Of course, I recognize that this movement was limited and did not directly engage with or transform the popular. How could it? How could culture, on its own, transcend the social, political and economic terrain on which it operates. Certainly, failing in its radical promise, many modernist impulses were then pulled back into more elitist formations. Williams long ago explained how emergent movements are assimilated into the dominant. This does not diminish the radical break with the epistemes of the modern which modernism represented. Since then, the engagement between modernism and the popular has been following a rapid but uneven path. This articulation—far from being completed—is only now really beginning. It's not that I don't respond positively to many elements in postmodernism, but the many separate and diverse strands, which modernism tried to hold together in one framework, have once again separated out. So there's now an aesthetic postmodernism, an architectural postmodernism, postmodernist theory, postmodernist film making, etc. Postmodern culture has become a set of disassociated specialisms. I suppose I am still very attracted by that highly contradictory point at the inception of modernism when an old paradigm is breaking up and a new one is being born. I'm drawn by the immediate intellectual excitement that is generated in the capacity to move from one thing to another, to make multiple cross-linkings, multi-accentualities, which was at the centre of the modernist project. However, while my tastes tend toward the modernist, I don't know whether I would locate myself now within the modernist theoretical project.

Question: It seems to me that the most powerful challenge to your theory of articulation—and its political implications—is Baudrillard's description of the masses as an implosive force that "can no longer be spoken for, articulated and represented."

Hall: I think the whole collapse of the critical French intelligentsia during the Mitterand era is inscribed in that statement. What raises my political hackles is the comfortable way in which French intellectuals now take it upon themselves

to declare when and for whom history ends, how the masses can or cannot be represented, when they are or are not a real historical force, when they can or cannot be mythically invoked in the French revolutionary tradition, etc. French intellectuals always had a tendency to use "the masses" in the abstract to fuel or underpin their own intellectual positions. Now that the intellectuals have renounced critical thought, they feel no inhibition in renouncing it on behalf of the masses—whose destinies they have only shared abstractly. I find it ironic that the silent majority, whom the intellectuals only discovered yesterday, is fueling the postmodernist collapse. France, like all western European capitalist societies, is in deep trouble. And, against the revolutionary myths which French intellectuals kept alive for so long, what we continue to confront in such developed western industrial societies is the much more accurate—and continuing—problem of the insertion of the masses in subordinate positionalities within dominant cultural practices. The longer that history has gone on, the more popular culture has been represented as inevitably corrupt, etc. It is critical intellectuals, locked into their own kind of cultural elitism, who have often succumbed to the temptation to give an account of the Other—the masses—in terms of false consciousness or the banalization of mass culture, etc. So the recognition of the masses and the mass media as significant historical elements is a useful corrective against that in postmodernism. But the politics which follows from saying that the masses are nothing but a passive reflection of the historical, economic and political forces which have gone into the construction of modern industrial mass society, seems to me historically incorrect and politically inadequate.

I would say quite the opposite. The silent majorities *do* think; if they do not speak, it may be because we have taken their speech away from them, deprived them of the means of enunciation, not because they have nothing to say. I would argue that, in spite of the fact that the popular masses have never been able to become in any complete sense the subject-authors of the cultural practices in the twentieth century, their continuing presence, as a kind of passive historical-cultural force, has constantly interrupted, limited and disrupted everything else. It is as if the masses have kept a secret to themselves while the intellectuals keep running around in circles trying to make out what it is, what is going on.

That is what Benjamin meant by saying that it isn't only the new means of mechanical reproduction but the historical presence of the masses which interrupts history. He didn't mean this as a guarantee that the masses are instantly going to take over the world and remake modern culture in their own image. He meant that they are now, irrevocably, on the historical stage and nothing can move any longer—including the dominant cultural industries—without taking that "presence" into account. Nothing can be constituted as high art without recognizing, in the existing distribution of educational practices, its relative divorce from the masses' experience. Nothing can become popular which does not negotiate the experiences, the codes, etc., of the popular masses...

For something to become popular entails a struggle; it is never a simple process, as Gramsci reminded us. It doesn't just happen. And that means there must be always some distance between the immediate practical consciousness or common sense of ordinary people, and what it is possible for them to become. I don't think that history is finished and the assertion that it is, which lies at the heart of postmodernism, betrays the inexcusable ethnocentrism—the Eurocentrism—of its high priests. It is their cultural dominance, in the West, across the globe, which is historically at an end. The masses are like an irritant, a point that you have to pass through. And I think that postmodernism has yet to go through that point; it has yet to actually think through and engage the

question of the masses. I think Baudrillard needs to join the masses for a while, to be silent for two thirds of a century, just to see what it feels like. So, it is precisely at the site of the question of the political possibilities of the masses that my political objections to, and contestations with, postmodernism come through most sharply.

Question: Some postmodern theorists are concerned with what they call "articulation," for example, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the articulation of desiring production. Could you describe your own theory of the articulation of ideology and ideological struggle?

Hall: I always use the word "articulation," though I don't know whether the meaning I attribute to it is perfectly understood. In England, the term has a nice double meaning because "articulate" means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an "articulated" lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called "unity" of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary "belongingness." The "unity" which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. Let me put that the other way: the theory of articulation asks how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it; it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position.

The theory of articulation, as I use it, has been developed by Ernesto Laclau, in his book *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. His argument there is that the political connotation of ideological elements has no necessary belongingness, and thus, we need to think the contingent, the non-necessary, connection between different practices—between ideology and social forces, and between different elements within ideology, and between different social groups composing a social movement, etc. He uses the notion of articulation to break with the necessitarian and reductionist logic which has dogged the classical marxist theory of ideology.

For example: Religion has no necessary political connotation. Anyone interested in the politics of contemporary culture has to recognize the continuing force in modern life of cultural forms which have a pre-history long predating that of our rational systems, and which sometimes constitute the only cultural resources which human beings have to make sense of their world. This is not to deny that, in one historical-social formation after another, religion has been bound up in particular ways, wired up very directly, as the cultural and ideological underpinning of a particular structure of power. That is certainly the case, historically; and in those societies, there are powerful, immensely strong what I would call "lines of tendential force" articulating that religious formation to

political, economic and ideological structures. So that, if you move into that society, it would be idiotic to think that you could easily detach religion from its historical embeddedness and simply put it in another place. Thus, when I say the connections are "not necessary," I don't mean religion is free-floating. It exists historically in a particular formation, anchored very directly in relation to a number of different forces. Nevertheless, it has no necessary, intrinsic, trans-historical belongingness. Its meaning—political and ideological—comes precisely from its position within a formation. It comes with what else it is articulated to. Since those articulations are not inevitable, not necessary, they can potentially be transformed, so that religion can be articulated in more than one way. I insist that, historically, it has been inserted into particular cultures in a particular way over a long period of time, and this constitutes the magnetic lines of tendency which are very difficult to disrupt. To use a geographical metaphor, to struggle around religion in that country, you need to know the ideological terrain, the lay of the land. But that's not to say, "that's how it is, so it always will be so." Of course, if you are going to try to break, contest or interrupt some of these tendential historical connections, you have to know when you are moving against the grain of historical formations. If you want to move religion, to rearticulate it in another way, you are going to come across all the grooves that have articulated it already.

Nevertheless, as we look across the modern and developing worlds, we see the extraordinary diversity of the roles which religious formations have actually played. We also see the extraordinary cultural and ideological vitality which religion has given to certain popular social movements. That is to say, in particular social formations, where religion has become the *valorized* ideological domain, the domain into which all the different cultural strands are obliged to enter, no political movement in that society can become popular without negotiating the religious terrain. Social movements have to transform it, buy into it, inflect it, develop it, clarify it—but they must engage with it. You can't create a popular political movement in such social formations without getting into the religious question, because it is the arena in which this community has come to a certain kind of consciousness. This consciousness may be limited, it may not have successfully helped them to remake their history. But they have been "language'd" by the discourse of popular religion. They have, for the first time, used religion to construct some narrative, however impoverished and impure, to connect the past and the present: where they came from with where they are and where they are going to, and why they are here...

In the case of the Rastafarians in Jamaica: Rasta was a funny language, borrowed from a text—the Bible—that did not belong to them; they had to turn the text upside down, to get a meaning which fit their experience. But in turning the text upside down, they remade themselves; they positioned themselves differently as new political subjects; they reconstructed themselves as blacks in the new world: they *became* what they are. And, positioning themselves in that way, they learned to speak a new language. And they spoke it with a vengeance. They learned to speak and sing. And in so doing, they did not assume that their only cultural resources lay in the past. They did not go back and try to recover some absolutely pure "folk culture," untouched by history, as if that would be the only way they could learn to speak. No, they made use of the modern media to broadcast their message. "Don't tell us about tom-toms in the forest. We want to use the new means of articulation and production to make a new music, with a new message." This is a cultural transformation. It is not something totally new. It is not something which has a straight, unbroken line of continuity from the past. It is transformation through a reorganization of the elements of a cultural

practice, elements which do not in themselves have any necessary political connotations. It is not the individual elements of a discourse that have political or ideological connotations, it is the ways those elements are organized together in a new discursive formation.

Let me come to the question of social forces. This ideology, which transforms a people's consciousness and awareness of themselves and their historical situation, although it explodes culturally, does not constitute itself *directly* as a social and political force. It has its limits, as all religious forms of explanation do. But it does become articulated to a social movement, a movement of people. And it functioned so as to harness or draw to it sectors of the population who have never been inside that historical bloc before. Is it a class? In the case of the Rastafarian movement, it has at its center the experiences, the position, the determinations of economic life in Jamaican society. It has at its heart a class formation. Is it only a class? No, it could not have become a historical or political force simply reduced to an already unified class. Indeed it never has been a unified class, with a unified ideology already in place. It is cross-cut, deeply intersected by, a variety of other determinations and ideologies. In fact, it only *becomes* a unified social force through the constitution of itself as a collective subject within a unifying ideology. It does not become a class or a unified social force until it begins to have forms of intelligibility which explain a shared collective situation. And even then, what determines the place and unity is nothing we can reduce to the terms of what we used to mean by an economic class. A variety of sectors of different social forces, in that moment, become articulated to and within this particular ideology. Therefore, it is not the case that the social forces, classes, groups, political movements, etc. are first constituted in their unity by objective economic conditions and then give rise to a unified ideology. The process is quite the reverse. One has to see the way in which a variety of different social groups enter into and constitute for a time a kind of political and social force, in part by seeing themselves reflected as a unified force in the ideology which constitutes them. The relationship between social forces and ideology is absolutely dialectical. As the ideological vision emerges, so does the group. The Rastafarians were, Marx would say, as a group in themselves, the poor. But they don't constitute a unified political force *because* they are poor. In fact, the dominant ideology makes sense of them, not as "the poor" but as the feckless, the layabouts, the underclass. They only constitute a political force, that is, they *become* a historical force in so far as they are constituted as new political subjects.

So it is the articulation, the non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world which makes intelligible the process they are going through, which begins to bring onto the historical stage a new social position and political position, a new set of social and political subjects. In that sense, I don't refuse the connection between an ideology or cultural force and a social force; indeed, I want to *insist* that the popular force of an organic ideology always depends upon the social groups that can be articulated to and by it. It is here that one must locate the articulating principle. But I want to think that connection, not as one *necessarily* given in socio-economic structures or positions, but precisely as the result of *an articulation*.

Question: Given your obviously close connection with theories of discourse and discursive analysis—your theory of articulation seems to suggest that the elements of a social formation be thought of as operating like a language—I wonder how far you are willing to go into a kind of poststructuralist position that would argue that society itself can be analyzed as a series of competing

languages. I'm thinking here particularly of Laclau and Mouffe's latest book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and I wonder how you would mark out the similarities and differences between their position and your own.

Hall: You are absolutely right in saying that I've gone a very long way along the route of rethinking practices as functioning discursively—i.e., like languages. That metaphor has been, I think, enormously generative for me and has powerfully penetrated my thinking. If I had to put my finger on the one thing which constitutes the theoretical revolution of our time, I think it lies in that metaphor—it's gone in a thousand different directions but it has also reorganized our theoretical universe. It is not only the discovery of the importance of the discursive, and the utility of a particular kind of analysis; it is also the metaphorically generated capacity to re-conceptualize other kinds of practices as operating, in some important ways, like a language. I think, for example, it's possible to get a long way by talking about what is sometimes called the "economic" as operating discursively. The discursive perspective has also brought into play a very important insight, namely, the whole dimension of subjectivity, particularly in the ideological domain. I think marxism and structuralism had already made a very significant break with the traditional notion of the empirical sociological subject. And probably, they had to go by way of what has been called the theory of "a history without subjects," a language with no speakers. But that was manifestly only a stopping point on the route to something else. It's just not possible to make history without subjects in quite that absolute way. The discursive perspective has required us to think about reintroducing, reintegrating the subjective dimension in a nonholistic, non-unitary way. From this point of view, one cannot ignore Laclau's and Mouffe's seminal work on the constitution of political subjects and their deconstruction of the notion that political subjectivities do flow from the integrated ego, which is also the integrated speaker, the stable subject of enunciation. The discursive metaphor is thus extraordinarily rich and has massive political consequences. For instance, it enabled cultural theorists to realize that what we call "the self" is constituted out of and by difference, and remains contradictory, and that cultural forms are, similarly, in that way, never whole, never fully closed or "sutured."

The question is, can one, does one, follow that argument to the point that there is nothing to practice but its discursive aspect. I think that's what their recent book does. It is a sustained philosophical effort, really, to conceptualize *all* practices as nothing but discourses, and all historical agents as discursively constituted subjectivities, to talk about positionalities but never positions, and only to look at the way concrete individuals can be interpellated in different subject positionalities. The book is thus a bold attempt to discover what a politics of such a theory might be. All of that I think is important. I still prefer *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* over *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. (Perhaps I ought to say in parenthesis that I do find an alarming tendency in myself to prefer people's less complete works to their later, mature and complete ones. I prefer *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to Book II of *Capital*. I prefer Althusser's *For Marx* to *Reading Capital*. I like people's middle period a lot, where they have gotten over their adolescent idealism but their thought has not yet hardened into a system. And I like Laclau when he's struggling to find a way out of reductionism and beginning to reconceptualize marxist categories in the discursive mode.) But in the last book, there is no reason why anything is or isn't potentially articulatable with anything. The critique of reductionism has apparently resulted in the notion of society as a totally open discursive field.

I would put it polemically in the following form: the last book thinks that the world, social practice, is language, whereas I want to say that the social operates *like* a language. While the metaphor of language is the best way of rethinking many fundamental questions, there's a kind of slippage from acknowledging its utility and power to saying that that's really the way it is. There's a very powerful tendency which pushes people, as soon as they get to the first position, to make the theoretically logical move of going all the way. Theoretically, perhaps, they are much more consistent than I am. Logically, once you've opened the gate, it's reasonable to go through it and see what the world looks like on the other side. But I think that that often becomes its own kind of reductionism. I would say that the fully discursive position is a reductionism upward, rather than a reductionism downward, as economism was. What seems to happen is that, in the reaction against a crude materialism, the metaphor of x operates like y is reduced to $x = y$. There is a very dramatic condensation which, in its movement, reminds me of theoretical reductionism very strongly. You see it most clearly in something like the reworking of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

And at that point, I think it's theoretically wrong; in fact, what is left of the old materialist in me wants to say extremely crude things like "I'd like to make you eat your words." Let me put this another more serious way. If you go back to the early formulations of historical materialism, what Marx always talks about is the way in which social and cultural structures overdetermine the natural ones. Marx is aware that we remain natural beings, that we remain in nature. What he's talking about is the elaborations of social and cultural organization which complete those natural structures. Our genetic constitution is extraordinarily open-ended and is thus a necessary but not sufficient way of becoming human. What is happening, historically, is the massive complexification of the social, the overdetermination of the natural by the social and cultural. So Nature can no longer stand as the ultimate guarantee of materialism. Already in the nineteenth century, Marx polemicized against that kind of vulgar materialism but there was, and still is, a sense in which orthodox marxists think that something is ultimately only real when you can put your hands on it in Nature. We can't be materialists in that way any longer. But I do think that we are still required to think about the way in which ideological/cultural/discursive practices continue to exist within the determining lines of force of material relations, and the expropriation of nature, which is a very different question. Material conditions are the necessary but not sufficient condition of all historical practice. Of course, we need to think material conditions in their determinate discursive form, not as a fixed absolute. I think the discursive position is often in danger of losing its reference to material practice and historical conditions.

Question: There seem to be two separate questions involved in your description of that slippage. One is how politically and historically specific the analysis is, and the other is whether opening the discursive terrain necessarily takes you into reductionism. Is the slippage the result of excessive abstraction and idealization that loses touch with the political and historical limits on the ways in which particular discourses can be articulated to one another? If what is lost in making the social formation into an open field of discourse is a particular sense of historical necessity, of limits within which languages are juxtaposed with one another in a social formation, that is a much more limited kind of problem. One simple way of posing that for Laclau and Mouffe might be to say that their position doesn't have enough of a political inflection. That's not necessarily the same as saying that, because they've opened the door onto thinking of society as a discursive formation, they are necessarily pulled into reductionism.

Hall: I do not think that opening the door to the discursive field necessarily takes you in that direction. It doesn't take me there. So I would prefer your first formulation. In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau contests the *a priori* insertion of classes, for instance, into marxist analysis because there is no way to substantiate such a philosophical *a priori*. Yet he does reintroduce class as a historical determinant. Now I find it very difficult to quarrel with that. I think the question of political inflection is a very real problem with a lot of people who have taken the full discursive route. But I don't think I would advance that critique against Laclau and Mouffe. The new book is quite striking in that it *does* try to constitute a new politics out of that position. In that sense, it's very responsible and original. It says, let's go through the discursive door but then, we still have to act politically. Their problem isn't politics but history. They have let slip the question of the historical forces which have produced the present, and which continue to function as constraints and determinations on discursive articulation.

Question: Is the difference between the two books then a matter of levels of abstraction?

Hall: I think they are quite heroic, in the new book, to say that until one can express these new positions in the form of a rigorously articulated general theory, one is still too bogged down in the pragmatics of local examples, conjunctural analysis, and so on. I don't operate well at that level, but I don't want to deny the importance of what is sometimes called "theoretical practice." It is not an autonomous practice, as some Althusserians have tried to talk about it, but it does have its own dynamic. At many important points, *Capital* is operating precisely at that level; it is a necessary level of abstraction. So the project itself is not wrong. But in carrying it out, they do tend to slip from the requirement to recognize the constraints of existing historical formations. While they are very responsible—whether you agree with them or not—about recognizing that their position does have political consequences, when they come down to particular political conjunctures, they don't reintegrate other levels of determination into the analysis. Instead, they take the abstractions which have been developed and elaborated, in a very rigorous and conceptual way at a high philosophical level, and insert them into the here and now. You don't see them adding, adding, adding, the different levels of determination; you see them producing the concrete philosophically, and somewhere in there is, I think, the kind of analytic slippage I am talking about. That's not to say that it's theoretically impossible to develop a more adequate set of political positions within their theoretical framework, but somehow, the route they have taken allows them to avoid the pressure of doing so. The structuring force, the lines of tendency stemming from the implantation of capital, for example, simply disappears.

Question: Two other terms becoming common in cultural theory are "post-marxism" and "poststructuralism." Both have, at various times, been used to describe your work. Can you describe your relation to these categories?

Hall: I am a "post-marxist" only in the sense that I recognize the necessity to move beyond orthodox marxism, beyond the notion of marxism guaranteed by the laws of history. But I still operate somewhere within what I understand to be the discursive limits of a marxist position. And I feel the same way about structuralism. My work is neither a refusal nor an apologia of Althusser's position. I refuse certain of those positions, but Althusser certainly has had an enormous influence on my thinking, in many positive ways that I continue to acknowledge, even after he has gone out of fashion. So "post" means, for me,

going on thinking on the ground of a set of established problems, a problematic. It doesn't mean deserting that terrain but rather, using it as one's reference point. So I am, only in that sense, a post-marxist and a poststructuralist, because those are the two discourses I feel most constantly engaged with. They are central to my formation and I don't believe in the endless, trendy recycling of one fashionable theorist after another, as if you can wear new theories like tee-shirts.

Question: It is clear that cultural studies is enjoying a new measure of success in the United States. I wonder how you feel about these recent successes to institutionalize and codify cultural studies.

Hall: I would like to perhaps make a distinction between the two terms that you use. I am in favor of institutionalization because one needs to go through the organizational moment—the long march through the institutions—to get people together, to build some kind of collective intellectual project. But codification makes my hackles rise, even about the things I have been involved in. People talk about "the Birmingham school" (The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham—ed.) and all I can hear are the arguments we used to have in Birmingham that we never were one school; there may have been four or five but we were never able to unify it all, nor did we want to create that kind of orthodoxy. Now let me say something, perhaps controversial, about the American appropriation of all that was going on at Birmingham, and cultural studies in general, for I see some interesting presences and absences. For instance, I find it interesting that formal semiotics here rapidly became a sort of alternative interpretive methodology, whereas I don't think anybody in England ever really believed in it as a complete method. When we took on semiotics, we were taking on a methodological requirement: you had to show *why* and *how* you could say that that is what the meaning of any cultural form or practice is. That is the semiotic imperative: to demonstrate that what you were calling "the meaning" is textually constituted. But as a formal or elaborated *methodology*, that was not what semiotics was for us. In America, taking on semiotics seemed to entail taking on the entire ideological baggage of structuralism. Similarly, I notice there is now a very rapid assimilation of the Althusserian moment into literary studies but without its marxist connotations. And I notice the same thing about Gramsci's work. Suddenly, I see Gramsci quoted everywhere. Even more troubling, I see Gramscian concepts directly substituted for some of the very things we went to Gramsci to avoid. People talk about "hegemony" for instance as the equivalent of ideological domination. I have tried to fight against that interpretation of "hegemony" for twenty years.

Sometimes, I hear a similar kind of easy appropriation when people start talking about cultural studies. I see it establishing itself quite rapidly on the foundations of existing academic departments, existing intellectual divisions, and disciplinary curricula. It becomes a kind of "received knowledge," instead of having a real critical and deconstructive edge to it. But I don't know what you do about that; I don't know how you refuse success. I think that in America, cultural studies is sometimes used as just one more paradigm. You know, there are fifteen around, so this time I will say that I have a cultural studies approach... I understand why that happens because, in a sense, there is a perspective there, despite its eclecticism and relative openness. It has always been trying to integrate itself into a perspective. That's inevitable whenever you try to get people to do research collectively because they have to collaborate while trying to answer specific questions. So there is a thrust toward codification inevitably, as the project develops and generates work. Let me put it this way: you have to be sure about a position in order to teach a class, but you have to be open-ended

enough to know that you are going to change your mind by the time you teach it next week. As a strategy, that means holding enough ground to be able to think a position but always putting it in a way which has a horizon toward open-ended theorization. Maintaining that is absolutely essential for cultural studies, at least if it is to remain a critical and deconstructive project. I mean that it is always self-reflectively deconstructing itself; it is always operating on the progressive/regressive movement of the need to go on theorizing. I am not interested in Theory, I am interested in going on theorizing. And that also means that cultural studies has to be open to external influences, for example, to the rise of new social movements, to psychoanalysis, to feminism, to cultural differences. Such influences are likely to have, and must be allowed to have, a strong impact on the content, the modes of thought and the theoretical problematics being used. In that sense, cultural studies cannot possibly thrive by isolating itself in academic terms from those external influences. So in all those ways I think there are good reasons, not just personal predilections, for saying that it must remain open-ended. It is theorizing in the postmodern context, if you like, in the sense that it does not believe in the finality of a finished theoretical paradigm.

Editor's Note: This article is drawn from interview sessions with Hall conducted by S. Elizabeth Bird, Marilyn Smith, Patrick O'Brien and Kuan-Hsing Chen (on postmodernism) at the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication in September, 1985, and by Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg and others (on articulation) at the University of Illinois Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory in August, 1985. Transcriptions were made by Kuan-Hsing Chen and Michael Greer.